

PROVIDING PROTECTION FOR OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, GA.

JUNE 7, 1956.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the State
of the Union and ordered to be printed

Mr. BOYKIN, from the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries,
submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany H. R. 9742]

The Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 9742) to provide for the protection of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Ga., against damage from fire and drought, having considered the same, report favorably thereon without amendment and recommend that the bill do pass.

The purpose of the bill is to protect Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia from the devastating effects of fire and drought. The refuge is unique, and since its acquisition by the United States, efforts have been made to preserve the wildlife, plant life, and trees in their original state. The fires last year destroyed trees that were hundreds of years old, destroyed a large part of the wildlife, and generally laid waste to a considerable portion of the refuge.

The land is swampy and future preservation of the character of the refuge depends on adequate water, both for maintenance of plant and animal life, and protection against fire. Some of the peat deposits are 15 feet in depth, and if ignited during a drought, may burn for months, devastating everything in the area, not only within the refuge, but also adjacent private lands with valuable timber resources.

In addition to the damage caused by recurring drought, the future of the refuge is endangered by the fact that the ground-water level in southeast United States is becoming lower, which has the effect of augmenting the probability of severe fire damage during dry periods.

The bill will accomplish protection and preservation of the resources by authorizing construction of roads to serve as firebreaks and sills and dikes in the waterways to maintain water levels during dry periods. The committee is of the opinion that these measures will

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accomplish the objective of preserving the values of the refuge for future generations.

The report of the Department of the Interior follows:

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY,
Washington, D. C., May 25, 1956.

Hon. HERBERT C. BONNER,

*Chairman, Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries,
House of Representatives, Washington, D. C.*

MY DEAR MR. BONNER: Your committee has requested a report on H. R. 9742, a bill to provide for the protection of the Okefenokee national wildlife refuge, Georgia, against damage from fire and drought. This bill would require the Secretary of the Interior to carry out certain developments relating to the wildlife refuge for the purpose of avoiding the disastrous fire losses that have occurred in the past in that area. The bill provides for construction of a road around the wildlife refuge, together with fire-access roads. It provides also for the construction of a sill and dike in the Suwanee River and for additional sills at other appropriate points in the wildlife refuge.

We recommend that H. R. 9742 be enacted.

Severe droughts occurred in 1910, 1932, and again in 1954, in the Okefenokee region. As a result of such droughts, extensive areas of the swamp and surrounding country were burned over. The recent drought affecting the South generally, and southeastern Georgia particularly, created an extremely serious fire condition in the Okefenokee area. Consequently, during the period from October 1954, to June 1955, approximately 284,000 acres of the wildlife refuge were burned over and at least 150,000 acres of State and privately owned forest land of commercial importance were burned over during the same period.

Fire losses in this region are severe and difficult to control because of the fact that the peatbeds in Okefenokee range in depths up to 15 feet. Once wildfires get into the peat, they can be extinguished only by rainfall or flooding of the area. Unfortunately, it will take hundreds of years to replace some of the giant cypress and gum trees that have been destroyed by fire in the region. To remedy this situation, the retention of water levels within the swamp, especially during drought periods, is essential. Construction of a low-level dam or sill in the Suwanee River and the placement of sills at other points to help guard against drainage and destruction of extensive portions of the swamp in future drought periods will be of very material assistance in accomplishing this purpose. As the prairies, waterways, and the lakes of the refuge finally become dry during drought periods, the abundant wildlife that the waters of the swamp accommodate either leave the area or perish. The drought and resultant fires have led to the substantial losses of forest land, the destruction of wildlife, and poor fishing in the area. The fires have resulted in a desolate appearance of much of the refuge. Remedial action is very desirable.

Okefenokee Swamp is a very interesting area. The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge occupies about nine-tenths of this area. The refuge contains some 329,000 acres. It extends about 38 miles from north to south and about 25 miles across at its widest point. Extensive cypress logging was conducted in the swamp before the area

was established as a wildlife refuge. The remaining virgin stands of cypress and gum and other pristine features of the swamp have been a matter of national interest for a long period and many people from other countries have made special trips just to see this unique area. In these circumstances, we consider the protection of the natural features of the Refuge to be very desirable.

The Bureau of the Budget has advised that there is no objection to the submission of this report to your committee. However, no commitment can be made prior to appropriation.

Sincerely yours,

WESLEY A. D'EWART,
Assistant Secretary of the Interior.

There are no changes in existing law.

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